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Recent regulations of the Commissioner of Education recognize the need for local school districts in the State of New York to extend existing programs or to develop new ones designed specifically to meet the needs of pupils who fail or underachieve. Guidance counselors contribute importantly to these programs. Some of these ongoing programs, developed to implement these regulations, are described herein. Methods for evaluation of current programs are explored; techniques for the identification of pupils to be served are suggested; the role of the counselor in dealing with these pupils is described; and possible program considerations are offered. (Author)

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GUIDANCE AND THE UNDERACHIEVER

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THE UNIVERSITY OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK/THE STATE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT
BUREAU OF GUIDANCE/ALBANY, NEW YORK 12224

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The State Education Department
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1967

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FOREWORD

Recent regulations of the Commissioner of Education recognize the need for local school districts in the State to extend existing programs or to develop new ones designed specifically to meet the needs of pupils who fail or underachieve. Guidance counselors contribute importantly to these programs.

Some of these ongoing programs, developed to implement these regulations, are described herein. Methods for evaluation of current programs are explored, techniques for identification of pupils to be served are suggested, the role of the counselor in dealing with these pupils is described, and possible program considerations are offered.

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Philip B. Langworthy
Assistant Commissioner for Pupil Personnel
Services and Continuing Education
September 1967

OVERVIEW

The New York State law directed toward helping failing and underachieving pupils[1] defines the failing pupil as one who has failed two or more subjects of study for a year. The underachiever is considered to be one who, on the basis of professional judgments, has not achieved for a year in accordance with his capacity. These regulations assign each local school responsibility for identifying children who fail or underachieve, discovering the causes of failure or underachievement, and effecting aid to bring about change.

Identification of these pupils, discovery of causation, and the subsequent remediation are activities for which all school personnel bear responsibility. The intent of the New York State law is for each local school district to review what it has done in the past in order to ascertain whether it can improve these efforts or whether it should proceed in new directions.

PUPIL IDENTIFICATION

Correctly identifying the underachiever is a complicated task that, in the final analysis, is subjective in nature. Essentially, one is trying to compare a pupil's school achievement to his capacity for doing school work with various degrees of success. Problems of definition and procedure arise: What is capacity? How is achievement determined or measured? How far below capacity (however measured) must the child be operating in order for him to be considered an underachiever?

Ultimately, each school district must set criteria of its own in this regard. However, certain broad guidelines are available. Generally, underachievement is signified by any appreciable discrepancy between a pupil's aptitude and his achievement, whether this gap be subjectively observed by school personnel or objectively measured by standardized tests. However, test interpreters should recognize that poor scholastic aptitude or achievement as measured by standardized tests might be a result of cultural environment, test-taking motivation, or other factors that affect performance. Too, concepts such as the validity and reliability of the standardized tests should be accounted for in interpretation.

A second means of identifying underachievers involves the observable behaviors of the pupil. Possible harbingers of potential difficulties might include a poor attendance record, a growing disinterest in or dislike of a subject, a steady downward trend in grades, a wide range between observed high's and low's in daily performance, and negative home or neighborhood factors. School personnel should thus be alert to such possible danger signals.

Thirdly, the underachiever may possess recognizable psychological characteristics. A review of thirty-two research studies published from 1963 through 1966 reveals a total of seventeen identifiable characteristics of underachievers. Of these, two are almost universal: hostility toward others and low self-concept. Three other characteristics which are often cited but which appear with considerably less frequency are immaturity in task orientation, lack of long range goals, and limited self-control.

PLANNING FOR CHANGE

There is no universally applicable plan to aid pupils who fail or underachieve. Each school district should engage in self-examination to gauge the extent and effectiveness of its current efforts. This self-study will lead to determining what improvements, innovations, or priorities should be instituted.

In Great Neck[2], for example, each of the four secondary school buildings is served by a teacher with training in reading, English, and guidance. This person serves as remedial reading instructor, tutor, and counselor (primarily on a one-to-one basis) with pupils whose measured intelligence is above 75 but whose achievement has been blocked. These pupils are periodically taken from study halls or from subject matter classes in which they exhibit low achievement. In the latter case, the tutor-counselor works closely with the teacher of the subject matter involved in an attempt to parallel, insofar as possible, the work being covered. The individual attention typically is given in time blocks of two or three weeks. If warranted, other staff members such as the counselor, the school psychologists, and the school social worker help parents to understand and to assume their roles.

THE ROLE OF THE COUNSELOR

While the counselor can and does play a unique role in the identification and education of the failing student or the underachiever, he is also a member of an interdependent school staff. Each professional sub-group within the school has its own particular strengths on which to draw in helping youngsters. Only when teachers, administrators, and pupil personnel staff share their skills, observations, and understandings is the pupil maximally aided. The counselor can make a contribution in four areas: the case conference, counseling, identification and modification of school-centered problems, and research.

The Case Conference

The sharing of information among diverse members of the school staff is well illustrated in the operation of the case conference. Here counselors, school psychologists, administrators, and involved teachers come together to discuss what may be done to help a specific pupil who presents a serious problem. Sometimes the pupil and/or his parents may be present. It should be emphasized that discussion is centered solely on the one pupil and his difficulties. A second type of case conference is that in which only pupil personnel staff and administrators are present. In this type of case conference, many pupils are screened at a single session. The aid of teachers is enlisted at a later time. Each of these two types of case conferences is complementary to the other and both are of fundamental importance.

In communities such as White Plains[3] and Yorktown Heights[4], these latter type conferences are held weekly in each of the building units within the districts. The building administrator, school psychologist,

school social worker, nurse-teacher, counselors, and director of pupil personnel services are in attendance. Other specialists, as they are affected, also may attend. The building administrator (who serves as moderator in close liaison with the director of pupil personnel services) prepares a dittoed agenda of pupil cases to be discussed. Central responsibility for presenting individual cases is given to the school psychologist, social worker, or counselor in turn. Each session lasts for approximately two hours. The number of specific cases brought forward at any one session may range from as few as four to as many as twenty, depending on the nature of the cases presented.

In several New York State communities, the case conference technique has recently been expanded to include several community agencies. In White Plains[5], for example, two teenage girls who had returned to the community from a detention home were the focus of a community-school case conference. Their cases were presented to the group by individuals who had previously worked with them. The group then attempted to find ways to re-integrate the girls into the community. The school district's director of pupil personnel services served as chairman for the meeting. Twenty-three other adults were present, including representatives of the Cage (a recreation center for alienated youth), the Department of Health, the Department of Welfare, the Human Rights Commission, the Legal Aid Society, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty of Children, the Special Services Clinic (mental health), the Youth Services (mayor's office), and the YMCA and YWCA. The group convenes once every two weeks at the local YMCA building. Sessions run for approximately one and one-half hours. By means of this joint endeavor, these professionals may uncover problems which would otherwise remain undetected. They may

alert key community representatives in order that appropriate steps may be taken without delay.

Counseling

Both individual and group counseling can be employed as effective helping techniques with failing and/or underachieving pupils. Counselors are, obviously, familiar with the individual approach. Group counseling is relatively new in the schools, but it offers a promising method of operation with these youngsters.

Broedel[6] cites a rationale for group methods which adults should bear in mind when working directly with young people in any type of group setting.

> Most /adolescents/ believe that few adults will listen to them and try to understand them.... On the other hand, they believe that their peers can and want to understand them. Adolescents appreciate the opportunity to exchange ideas with peers in a permissive and accepting group. ...Moreover, they are genuinely reassured when they discover that their peers have problems similar to their own.

In an attempt to modify pupils' attitudes and habits, the West Irondequoit Central School District[7], in conjunction with the University of Rochester, conducted a three-year group counseling project. Underachievers were counseled in groups; simultaneously, group sessions were held with their parents and teachers. The counselors who conducted these groups first underwent an intensive inservice workshop, comprised of ten whole-day sessions. Helen F. Rice, Coordinator of Curriculum Planning, reports gains in pupil achievement. In addition, the following benefits were also cited:

- Teachers and counselors each gained in their understanding and appreciation of the roles and the problems of the other.
- Parents gained new insights into the problems of their underachieving children and also gained reassurance in the knowledge that other parents had problems similar to their own.
- Parents gained an understanding of and an appreciation for the school's efforts in behalf of their children.
- As an outgrowth of their joint endeavor in this project, the local school district and the University of Rochester are now attempting a new project "to investigate further the role and contribution of the school counselor as it relates to the school's concern for motivation, underachievement, and other 'all-school' problems."

Identification and Modification of School-Centered Problems

The counselor and other school staff members should actively seek out those school-centered factors which hinder academic achievement. This search may include investigation of such areas as curriculum, homework policy, marking system, teacher expectations, flexibility of pupil subject choice, and availability of remedial services. If modifications in school environment are adopted, evaluation is necessary to determine the effects of change.

There is ample evidence that many local districts are concerned with these varied school-centered factors which may hinder achievement. In 1967, within federally or state supported projects, a diversity of approaches could be observed, including: ABLE (23 districts), STEP

(31 districts), Talent Search (35 districts), and Re-entry (24 districts). In all, within these four programs approved through the Bureau of Guidance, there were a total of 113 special projects in 93 districts.

Two projects are presently under way in Yorktown Heights[8]. These projects demonstrate that severely handicapped pupils can be aided by specialists who work with relatively few pupils. In one program, thirteen ninth grade underachieving boys spend most of the school day in a special setting apart from the secondary school building. They are served by three teachers who devote a year of full-time work to helping them acquire knowledge and study skills in four academic courses. In addition, each boy is given an industrial arts experience. In the second project, one teacher spends the major portion of his time working in a special setting with five youngsters. These pupils have either failed to graduate from high school within the normal time interval or are in danger of not graduating. It is anticipated that each of these pupils will receive diplomas based on successful completion of normal requirements.

The impact on pupil achievement as a result of additional teachers with specialized training and smaller classes has been noted also in elementary school settings. Non-specialized groupings of elementary school pupils within the ABLE project at South New Berlin[9] have produced positive results.

Research

Research related to aiding underachievers is sparse at the local level. Golburgh and Penney[10] note that, "While numerous studies have attempted to establish the causes of underachievement, the counseling literature seems devoid of specific procedural suggestions." Carmical[11]

has stated, "Continued research in the area is a necessity. Studies have failed to offer any suggestions specific enough to facilitate advancement in the direction toward the solution of the dilemma." The research literature from 1963 through 1966 contains more than three times as many studies relating to the characteristics of underachievers as it does studies pertaining to procedures with which to aid them.

The counselor should help his district to initiate and to conduct studies within the area of remediation. It is only by means of small-scale, local research, subsequently shared with other districts, that guidelines for effective programs will emerge.

HOSTILITY AND THE SELF-CONCEPT

It was noted earlier that two relatively universal characteristics of underachievers are a hostility towards others and a low self-concept. Therefore, two goals of the counselor might be to decrease the underachiever's hostility toward others and to improve his self-concept.

Decreasing the Underachiever's Hostility

An atypical approach to the problem of hostility is illustrated by the previously cited Yorktown Heights approach. Thirteen grossly underachieving ninth grade boys have been removed for a year from regular classroom groupings. All their learning activities, with the exceptions of homeroom, physical education, and lunch, are conducted in a separate building setting. Here the three specially selected teachers accept statements of hostility and aggressive interpersonal relationships which could not be tolerated in a normal classroom. It is reported that within the one-year interval pupils work out their hostile feelings to the point that they can successfully be assimilated into regular classrooms.

In their STEP and Re-entry project reports, many schools cite work-study programs. Pupils spend part of the day in school and part of the day working for pay. One of the benefits of this plan is that the pupil who spends fewer hours in the classroom will have less time to build resentment toward the school environment which has often frustrated him in the past. He also feels that the school, in fostering his job-seeking and job-holding, is now helping him to attain an immediate and primary goal. Hence, his hostility toward the school is lessened.

These are illustrations of but two activities designed to decrease hostility in the underachiever. They are suggestive of the types of programs which may be provided; however, they should not be regarded as definitive.

Improving the Underachiever's Self-Concept

Gowan[12] has emphasized the need for early identification and remediation of underachievement.

> It does seem apparent that where underachievement has been of long duration, lengthy and protracted therapy involving change in self-concept is necessary to cure it. This finding suggests that we could do better to nip underachievement in the bud by conducting a yearly survey in every class... We need to pinpoint the cause and institute remedial measures at the time, not years later.

Counseling efforts directed toward this end have indicated that the counselor's theoretical orientation is relatively independent of results. Regardless of whether the counselor has employed directive, non-directive, or eclectic counseling techniques, one can point to findings of significant growth, or relatively neutral results, or even negative change on the parts of counselees. Winborn and Schmidt[13] suggest that negative results in short-term group counseling should lead researchers to explore other possibilities, such as increasing the number of group counseling sessions or providing individual counseling, study clinics, or achievement workshops.

Counseling, however, is merely one modus operandi for building the pupil's self-concept. Mention has previously been made of work-study programs in this regard. The Amsterdam School System[14] has addressed itself to the problem of helping the educationally disadvantaged pupil increase his self-concept at an early age. Pupils are enrolled in an

Operation Headstart program and are moved directly into an ABLE project. Here they receive special help in the primary grades in the form of a non-graded program geared toward eliminating the grade failure concept. The elementary school program in the Dansville Central District[15] includes a series of reinforcing procedures. Among these are programmed instruction to complement the work of the teacher, a remedial reading program, a study skills program, and individual and small group counseling sessions conducted by a school psychologist and a counselor. This total remedial program is centered around the new Learning Materials Center.

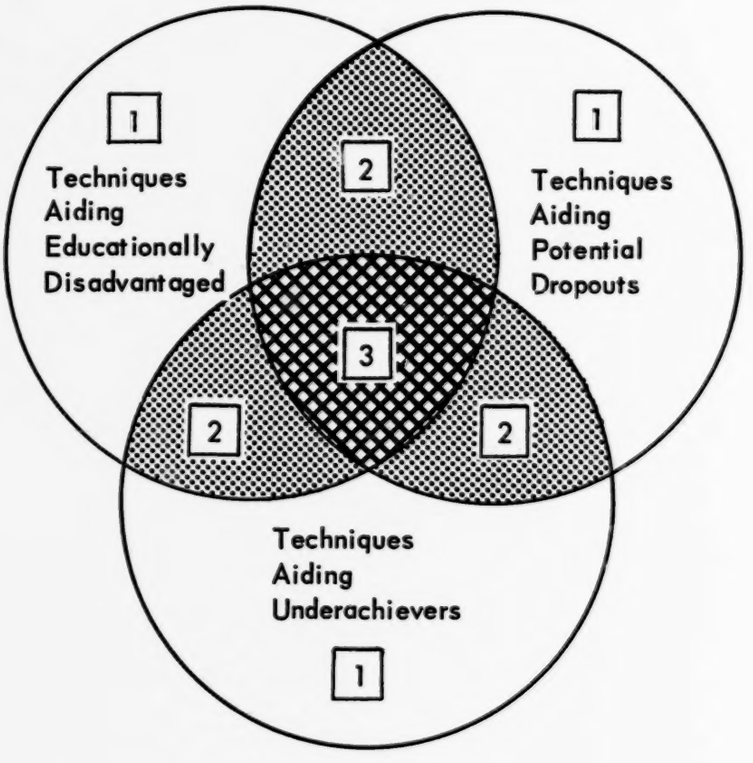
A POSSIBLE PLAN OF OPERATION

It is desirable to approach the problem of aiding underachievers through diverse means. It is possible that programs for assisting the underachiever will overlap with programs for aiding the educationally disadvantaged pupil or the potential dropout. Currently, some school districts have projects and programs directed to aiding one or more of these three groups.

Therefore, it may be possible for a group of cooperating school districts independently to draw up a list of techniques found to be most effective locally in aiding the educationally disadvantaged pupil. These independently conceived lists could then be combined into a master list of techniques arranged according to frequency of report. Similarly, master lists could be compiled pertaining to programs to assist potential dropouts and to aid underachievers in general. After the three separate lists are collated, cross comparisons could be made. It may be assumed that certain of these techniques will be contained on all three lists, others on two, and still others unique to single lists. This overlapping and uniqueness might be diagrammed as in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1

Common and Unique Techniques in Helping Underachievers, Potential Dropouts, and Educationally Disadvantaged Students



Those techniques common to all (#3) would be most strongly recommended as demonstrating effective broad-scale procedures. Those in shaded areas (#2) are claimed to have two-fold effectiveness. Those in unshaded areas (#1) have been demonstrated to be effective in unique areas only. Further, it is possible that some techniques which are designated unique to a single area may be experimented with in other areas. For example, assume that work-study programs are listed as unique to the area of working with the educationally disadvantaged. A school district might wish to assign underachievers to a work-study program and assay the effectiveness of this technique on a different population.

If this plan is feasible, the Bureau of Guidance could (1) prepare the necessary questionnaire for the listing of techniques found to be effective at the local level, (2) mail such a questionnaire to counselors, (3) compile a master list, (4) make appropriate cross comparisons, (5) list the results in categories 1, 2, and 3 as described above, and (6) send to the schools these summary lists. Thus schools would be provided a list of techniques previously found to be effective locally and techniques potentially worth attempting to aid underachievers in general.

SUMMARY

1. Seeking procedures to aid failing or underachieving pupils is an activity that begins with an evaluation of that which is currently being done in a local district.

2. Two essential preliminaries to providing assistance involve identifying pupils who fail and/or underachieve and determining causes of failure and/or underachievement.

3. Optimum results can be obtained only if the counselor works with all resource people both within and without the school.

4. The counselor is centrally involved in the process of aiding failing and/or underachieving pupils in (a) the case conference, (b) individual and group counseling, (c) identification and modification of school-centered factors which impede academic achievement, and (d) research to evaluate the effectiveness of programs.

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4 Yorktown Central School, District #2, Yorktown Heights, New York. Richard P. Cook, Director of Pupil Personnel Services.

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SUGGESTED READINGS

Holt, John. How children fail. New York. Pitman. 1964. 181 pp.
Actual school written memoranda are used to demonstrate the strategies children use to meet or evade the demands teachers and parents make on them. The effect of fear and failure on children, the distinction between real and apparent learning, and the ways in which schools fail to meet the needs of children are pointed out.

Kornrich, Milton. Underachievement. Springfield, Illinois, Charles C. Thomas. 1965. 670 pp.
Fifty-one selected papers on underachievement are presented, many of which refer to the bright underachiever. However, there are papers which concern themselves with mentally retarded or the large average group. The concept of underachievement is challenged in two papers.

Margolin, R.J. & Williamson, A.C. Case conferences in education. Boston, Massachusetts. Bruce Humphries. 1961. 115 pp.
Attention is focused on studies of three underachieving pupils, age six through fourteen. The procedures used are described and the results evaluated in terms of this public school attempt to parallel the effective case conference technique employed in a neuropsychiatric hospital.

Miller, L.M. Guidance for the underachiever with superior ability. Bulletin. 1961. Number 25. Washington. United States Office of Education. 1961. 85 pp.
This bulletin explores the nature and scope of underachievement, and defines and presents suggestions for the identification of academic underachievers. Recommendations for programs at the elementary, secondary, and college levels, and implications for guidance services are noted.

Raph, J.B., Goldburg, N.L., & Passow, A.H. Bright underachievers. New York. Teachers College Press. 1966. 289 pp.
Dealing with underachievement among intellectually superior high school pupils, this book reviews research since 1925. Two studies report self-perceptions and attitudes of underachievers, teachers' viewpoints, and the effects of remedial procedures. Included is a 13 page bibliography.

Regulations of the Commissioner of Education. Article XXIII, Section 187-a. The State Education Department. Albany, New York. 1965.
This section provides guidelines for identification of "children who fail or underachieve," and defines procedures for meeting their needs.

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This booklet is designed for those persons interested in developing a research project concerned with achievement. The author assumes that the reader is well-grounded in his knowledge of statistical concepts.

Wellington, C.B. & Wellington, Jean. The underachiever: challenges and guidelines. Chicago. Rand McNally. 1965. 122 pp.

The authors' diversity of approach is demonstrated simply through a listing of the ten chapter titles: The underachiever's state of mind, Selecting underachievers, Personality of the underachiever, Aspirations of underachievers, The parent and the home, Sociology and environment in underachieving, School programs: elementary, School programs: secondary, Special recommendations, Some considerations for dealing with underachievers. This book contains a comprehensive bibliography.

SUGGESTED FILMS

College Board Film Library. 267 West 25th Street. New York City. 10001.

Going to school. 16 mm, 28 min.

This film, addressed to the question "School - What's it all for?", through depicting realistic situations in school and in home or neighborhood settings counsels children from disadvantaged environments to look ahead and therefore better comprehend the value of school. Pupils, grades 7 through 12, teachers and counselors may find this film helpful.

Guidance Associates. Pleasantville, New York 10570.

Failure: A step toward growth. Two filmstrips. color. sound two 12 inch LP records.

This filmstrip helps young people put their own personal failures in perspective. It uses live case studies to help pupils discover and cope with their fears.